

HODA'S SECRET

Continued From Last Issue

went out towards the stables. He found Mr. Dering still busy with the head groom and waited very patiently until he had finished and then walked with him towards the house. When they had entered the broad walk that led from the stables to the house, Jack stopped.

"Mr. Dering, I want to tell you—"

"Well, Jack?"

"You will be angry—I know you will be angry; but I cannot go away without telling you."

Mr. Dering looked wonderingly at the young man's pale face.

"Jack," you have got into debt again—broken your promise to your father."

"No—it's not that—I won't break that promise—it's nothing like that. But I will make a clean breast of it, and you may forbid me the house if you will!"

"Go on; let's hear what it is."

"I love Molly, sir!"

Mr. Dering stepped back to the other side of the path; he did not speak, and Jack went on.

"I love her, sir, with all my heart and soul! I can't help it! Who could help loving Molly?"

"Does she know?" asked Mr. Dering, after a moment's pause.

"I don't know; yes, I do know. She must have guessed; but I never said anything till this morning."

"Well?"

"I didn't say anything plain, and she put me off. She said I must take my degree. Of course I must. But when that's over and I come back, I must speak to her!"

Mr. Dering shook his head.

"It won't do, Jack!"

"Why not, sir? I know I shall never be rich; but my father has enough, and I am his only child."

"It won't do, Jack," Mr. Dering repeated. "Molly is going to marry her cousin!"

Jack turned pale.

"It can't be true?"

"It has been arranged with Adrian for years," returned Mr. Dering.

"Molly laughs at him. He is too old, too grave for her."

"Not at all. You and Molly are two children, Jack, and you must forget all this. Go away, my boy, and learn to forget it!"

"I am going away," Jack returned with a dreary smile; "but I shall not forget it, and, when I come back, I shall do my best to win Molly, sir!"

"She and Adrian are meant for each other. Mrs. Dering will be shocked at this, Jack; she trusted you!"

The young man drew himself up with a look of pride.

"I love Molly," he repeated firmly; "I have no reason to feel ashamed! You have let us be friends together, and I love her. I mean to tell her so when I come back!"

"It won't do, Jack," repeated Mr. Dering, shaking his head; "Molly must marry Adrian! You were right to tell me; but you will see that it will not do. It would break Mrs. Dering's heart."

"I thought it right to tell you," Jack said, ignoring the last remark.

"I won't say anything to Molly now, I will promise you that, and I won't come in to luncheon. Make my excuses to Mrs. Dering."

The young man shook hands and strode away. Dering looked after him with a fond look.

"But it won't do!" he repeated, as he turned toward the house.

He went straight to his wife's room and found her speaking gravely to Molly, who was standing on the hearth rug, listening very demurely to her mother's speech.

"Run away, Molly," said Mr. Dering, sitting down upon one of the great oak armchairs by the fireplace. "I want to speak to your mother."

"Go and change your dress, Mary," said Mrs. Dering, "and get your hair done afresh."

"I shall look so neat that Adrian will ask to be introduced," the girl answered lightly. "Don't be cross any more, mother dear."

"I am not cross," replied Mrs. Dering—"only anxious that you should remember that you are no longer a child."

"I will be so good that you won't know me!" Molly went lightly to the door and then turned round. "I may invite 'Bill' to luncheon, mayn't I?"

"Bill—who is that?" said Mr. Dering, who had been watching his daughter's every movement with admiring eyes.

"My darling puppy—may he come?"

Mr. Dering laughed.

"Go away; and bring Bill if you like."

Molly shut the door and her father turned to Mrs. Dering.

"She's a perfect child still, isn't she?"

"I have been speaking to her about her childish ways. I am glad that Rhoda is coming. She wants a companion."

Mrs. Dering moved uneasily in his chair.

"I have been talking to Jack," he said, with a troubled glance.

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Arcadia, Florida

"To Jack? What have you been saying?"

"He has been speaking to me. He says he is in love with Molly."

Mr. Dering did not meet his wife's glance, but bent over the fire to arrange the logs. Mrs. Dering got up and crossed over to him.

"George, the boy must be mad! You told him it was out of the question, of course!"

"Yes, Agnes—I told him so."

"Well?"

"Well, the boy is in earnest. He has gone to his tutor's, but he intends to speak to Molly when he comes back."

"You must forbid it! Write to his father, George, and forbid it absolutely. Mary must marry Adrian. This must be put a stop to at once!"

And Mrs. Dering looked towards her writing table as if she would then and there write a final letter.

"My dear, you are not quite just about this. I do not want Molly to marry Jack, but what are we to do? I told him that it was out of the question. I told him it wouldn't do."

"I shall write to him!"

"No, Agnes," Mr. Dering spoke firmly. "He has gone to Oxford, and he will be away for three months or so. If in that time Adrian can win Molly, well, then, that will be all right!"

Mrs. Dering stood looking into the fire with a frowning brow and compressed lips. She completely ruled her husband in small matters, but she knew she must yield in this.

"Mary must marry Adrian," she said again with emphasis.

"That is what I want. But I will not have her forced into it, Agnes!"

"Jack is a boy. Molly cannot care for him. Adrian will find it easy to win her!"

Mr. Dering said nothing, but shook his head as his wife turned away.

CHAPTER III

At Mr. Dering's request, Mrs. Amable had sent two lay sisters with Rhoda as far as Calais. At Calais she was met by her uncle. As the train drew up at the platform she was looking out, expecting to see

some tall dark man like her father. It was a great surprise when a somewhat short, burly, cheery little gentleman bustled up to her and held out his hands.

"I should have known you anywhere, my dear," he said warmly. "You are a thorough Dering. We have ever so many good likenesses of you at home in our picture gallery."

They had only just time to catch the boat, and Mr. Dering hurried his niece away, only giving her a few moments for a hasty farewell to her two companions.

"Very kind, good women they looked too," he said, referring to them when he and Rhoda were safe on the boat. "And they must be so fond of you, Rhoda. I'll bound you shed a good many tears last night. How many years have you been there?"

"Ever since my mother died," Rhoda answered steadily.

"I wish you had come to us before, but there were circumstances which I do not care to mention."

He looked at the girl uneasily. "Your father and I are not friends, Rhoda. You must not talk about him at Dering."

"I understand," she replied, and turned to hide the quiver of her lips. Her uncle patted her shoulder gently.

"I wouldn't say it to you if you knew him better, my dear. But he has not been a good man. Now you are coming home, my dear, and you will have a father and mother and a dear little sister. Heaven bless her!"

Rhoda's heart was swelling with wounded feelings, but she kept her voice steady as she asked:

"How old is your daughter?"

"Just eighteen. Three years younger than you are! But you look older than you are, Rhoda. That is because you are dark!"

"And she is fair?"

"Blue eyes and light brown hair—a regular English beauty. You will see her this evening. She is prepared to love you dearly, and I want you to love her very much. Rhoda, I love us all. You are going home, remember. It will be as

much your home as it is Molly's. You are my daughter now. You understand that, don't you, my dear?"

"Thank you," the girl said faintly.

The warm tones the kindly looks only served to increase the feeling of misery at her heart. As she stood there watching the coast of France disappear in the cloudy distance, it was with difficulty that she prevented herself from telling her uncle all the truth. But her father's words were in her ears—"If they knew the truth, the doors of Dering will be shut to you for ever." And these words kept her silent.

It was quite dark when they reached Dering. The carriage was waiting for them at the station, and they drove quickly through long avenues of stately elms and limes that led to the house. Rhoda's uncle half lifted her out and led her up the steps.

"Welcome home, my dear!" he said, kissing her, as they reached the door. Then he led her in.

Rhoda had one glance at the great hall, with its glorious arched roof and panelled walls, and then two loving arms were clasped close round her, and Molly's sweet voice repeated her father's "Welcome home!"

Mrs. Dering waited at the drawing room to greet Rhoda.

"We are very glad to see you, Rhoda," she said in her kind firm tones.

The calmness of the greeting restored Rhoda's self-possession, which had nearly given away. She answered questions about the journey with perfect calmness, conscious that Mrs. Dering's eyes were surveying her with critical surprise.

Mrs. Dering turned to her husband when Molly had taken Rhoda away to her room.

"I had no idea that Rhoda would be like this," she said. "I expected a girl, a shy young girl."

"She is a perfect Dering!" returned Mr. Dering heartily. "She is exactly like that beautiful portrait of Prudence Dering in the hall."

"I do not see much likeness. Rhoda's eyes are gray."

(To Be Continued.)